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ABSTRACT

The most important characteristics for females judging the attractiveness of males, and for males judging females, were eyes, body build and facial complexion. Previously, females tended to place less importance on physical components of attraction for both themselves and men. Possible interpretations are: (1) women have become more egalitarian with respect to their judgment of importance of physical characteristics, (2) women's attitudes may have changed so that they now view males as sexual objects, and (3) the importance of physical characteristics in judging the opposite sex may have increased in general so that the difference may reflect general societal changes. (BN)

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SEXUAL ATTRACTIVENESS OF MALES AND FEMALES

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Our studies were conducted to investigate variables related to sexual attractiveness based on somatic preferences. In our first study, Ss were presented with lists of 24 physical characteristics and were asked to: 1) indicate the importance of each characteristic in determining the sexual attractiveness of their own sex; 2) indicate the importance of each characteristic in determining the sexual attractiveness of the opposite sex; and 3) indicate their self satisfaction with those characteristics. In our second study, Ss were given basically the same tasks but only 17 characteristics were used.

Both experiments revolved around two major questions; first, what are the most important characteristics determining sexual attractiveness for the same and the opposite sex; and second, are there differences in importance placed on these characteristics between males and females.

Surprisingly enough, the literature on the differential importance of various body characteristics in judging sexual attractiveness has been quite sparse. Not long ago, Hochberg (1964) indicated, "Except for some arbitrary beauty contest conventions about "ideal" female dimensions...

we know less about attractive stimuli for man than we do about fish (p. 112).

Wiggins et al. (1971) have also recognized this lack of information. They indicate that, "although there is a remarkably small scientific literature on the subject, it is generally believed that female bodies are the most significant determinants of sexual attractiveness for males. More specifically (and in the absence of good scientific data), it is generally believed that female breasts, buttocks, and legs are among the body parts most heavily weighed by men in their evaluation of feminine pulchritude (p. 370)".

The few studies that have examined somatic preference have, for the most part, assumed as did Wiggins et al. (1971) that the relevant characteristics were the stereotypical ones; namely, breasts, buttocks, and legs (Wiggins, Wiggins, & Conger, 1968; Scodell, 1957; Beck, Ward-Hull, & McLear, 1976; Lavrakas, 1975). Moreover, the research has emphasized the somatic preference of males for females with a noticeable lack of research showing females' preference for males.

In one of the first systematic investigations of somatic preference Wiggins et al. (1968) attempted to test the belief that males' physical attraction to females is based on responses to these stereotypical characteristics. They had 95 male undergraduate students make paired-comparison preference ratings of nude female silhouettes that varied in size of breasts, buttocks, and legs. The subject was required to indicate which of the two he found more attractive. The results of that study suggested that female breasts, buttocks, and legs were indeed among the determinants of heterosexual somatic preference for males and that these were related to background and personality characteristics of the subjects.

Lavrakas (1975) used similar paired-comparisons of front view silhouettes to gather information concerning female preference for male physiques. His results suggested that females' preference can be summarized in terms of feminine and masculine sex-role stereotypes. Furthermore, a female's preference for a male physique may serve as an initial delimiter in narrowing the field of eligibles in heterosexual pairing. Lavrakas acknowledged the absence of systematic investigation in the important specific components of the male physique and chose to use the concept of

the traditional "muscleman" stereotype as his normative basis for female preference. The overall trend of his results, however, suggested that this traditional image of the "ideal" man holds little attraction for most women.

Perhaps more importance has been placed on the traditional stereotypical physical characteristics in judging attractiveness than is justified. In a study on physical attractiveness, Lerner et al. (1973) had 118 male and 190 female college students rate 24 body characteristics in terms of (a) how satisfied they were with each characteristic of their own body; (b) how important each part was in determining attractiveness of the opposite sex; and (c) how important each part was in determining their own physical attractiveness. Contrary to the assumption made by Wiggins et al. (1968) that men considered breasts, buttocks, and legs as the female body parts most important in determining attractiveness, Lerner et al. found other global characteristics more important (e.g., general appearance, face, and body build) and moreover, the rank order correlations of these body parts were markedly consistent for both males and females.

While the importance of various body parts in determining physical attractiveness of subjects own body and that of the opposite sex maintained consistency, Lerner et al. found that where there were inconsistencies, the differences were in accord with the obvious sex-linked body stereotypes. Males and females tended to rank "width of shoulders" and "height" as more important for males, while "hips", "shape of legs", and "thighs" were ranked as more important for females. These experimenters also found that the mean ratings of importance men placed on womens body parts were significantly greater than the importance women placed on mens body parts, which they implied indicated a primary concern for "romance" on the part of the females rather than with the attractiveness of the male body, although no statistical correlation was presented to link somatic preference and romance. They failed to mention, however, that this difference could be due to the fact that females tended to rate physical characteristics in general as less important than did males even when judging their own attractiveness as well as the attractiveness of males.

In the last few years there has been an increasing availability of

information about the feminist movement and a corresponding increase in the coverage of this and related topics by many of the popular publications. Among other things, this movement has emphasized sexual awareness and, therefore, attitudes of females towards males as sexual objects may have changed. Specifically, females may give more importance to physical attributes in judging the attractiveness of males than previously.

In our opinion, the previous researchers may have assumed more than what their data revealed. In particular, we question the importance of the stereotypical characteristics in determining sexual attraction; we question whether differences between importance placed on physical characteristics differ between men and women any longer, and finally we question the appropriateness of linking somatic preference with any psychological variables (like romance) especially in the absence of data.

Our data can shed some light on at least two of those questions. The study was based on the responses of 144 female and 123 male undergraduate psychology students from California State University at Long Beach and Cerritos College. First, in terms of the importance of the stereotypical characteristics, a glance at Table 1 (which shows the importance rankings for same and opposite sex for both males and females) indicates that although these

characteristics may be important, other attributes are of even greater importance. For example, while males judgements of females legs, buttocks, and breasts are important they ranked only 5, $6\frac{1}{2}$, and 8 respectively. Of more importance to males in judging female attractiveness were facial complexion, body build, and eyes.

For females judging the attractiveness of males again eyes, body build, and facial complexion seemed to be of greatest importance.

While these data do not discount the importance of the stereotypical characteristics, they seem to be consistent with the notion that the more global characteristics are most important

Table 2 shows the correlation matrix and seems to be consistent with earlier studies showing a remarkable similarity between importance rankings for both sexes. Both sexes seem to view the order of these characteristics in much the same way for themselves as do members of the opposite sex do for them

Perhaps of greatest importance was the finding that contrary to previous studies there was no significant difference in the importance ratings made by women between same sex and opposite sex. Previously, females tended

to place less importance on physical components of attraction for both themselves and men. Our data suggest that this is no longer the case. Not only was there no significant difference between the ratings of same and opposite sex importance by females, but the overall importance ratings seemed higher than before. This seems to suggest that attitudes of women have changed and they now place equal importance on physical characteristics for both males and females, or at least they now say so. These means are shown in Table 3. Sign test results are shown in Table 4.

On the other hand, differences between same and opposite sex importance ratings for males is much greater. Males indicate that female physical characteristics are more important in general than male physical characteristics in determining attraction.

The data lends itself to several possible interpretations. First, on a very simple level, the campaign for female awareness may have changed attitudes of females and therefore women have become more egalitarian with respect to their judgment of importance of physical characteristics. Secondly, womens attitudes may have, for the worse, become like mens in

that they may now view males as sexual objects just as they have been viewed as sexual objects by males. A third interpretation suggested from the data is that importance of physical characteristics in judging the opposite sex may have increased in general and so the difference or lack thereof may reflect general societal changes.

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Table 1

Same sex and opposite sex importance rankings for males and females

	MALES		FEMALES	
	Self	Opposite	Self	Opposite
Facial Complexion	1	1	3	3
Eyes	2.5	3	1	1
Hair	2.5	4	2	6
Body Build	4	2	4	2
Teeth	5	10	8	5
Shape of Legs	12	5	5	14
Chest/Breasts	7	8	7	10
Buttocks	8	6.5	9	9
Waist	6	6.5	6	11.5
Hips	17	9	10	15
Thighs	15	11	12.5	13
Height	10.5	13.5	16	4
Shoulders	9	17	17	8
Mouth	13.5	12	11	11.5
Age	13.5	16	12.5	7
Genitals	10.5	13.5	15	16
Nose	16	15	14	17

Table 2

Rank order correlations of importance ratings for males and females

		Males		Females	
		Self	Opposite	Self	Opposite
Males	Self	--	.69**	.70**	.76***
	Opposite		--	.93***	.44
Females	Self			--	.49*
	Opposite				--

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Comparison of means for same and opposite sex importance ratings*

	Males		Females	
	Self	Opposite	Self	Opposite
Lerner et al. (1973)	2.46	2.37	2.62	2.91
Taylor et al. (1977)	2.50	2.34	2.42	2.44
Taylor et al. (1978)	2.48	2.30	2.57	2.57

* 1 = very important, 5 = very unimportant

Table 4

Comparison of sign test results for same and opposite sex importance ratings*

	Males same vs. opposite	Females same vs. opposite	Females opposite vs. Males opposite
Lerner et al. (1973)	.238	.002	.001
Taylor et al. (1977)	.006	.190	.064
Taylor et al. (1978)	.144	.630	.050

* entries are probabilities